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THE COURSE OF THOUGHT IN ECCLESIASTES.

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Nothing satisfies in this life.—But God orders the affairs of man.—Only injustice and oppression rule in this world.—What are the things worth living for?—Duty done is the end of life.—Rise above your surroundings.—Genuine satisfaction is found only in fearing God and keeping his commandments.

In *The Old and New Testament Student*, vol. xiv., p. 98, is the statement that the Book of Ecclesiastes might well be called a picture of the soul of the Prodigal Son on his return to the Father. A sketch of the course of thought in the book is here given, which, it is thought, illustrates this quoted statement. We find here pictured the thoughts and moods which attend the reflections on life, its disappointments, mistakes, and real meaning.

Qoheleth begins, 1 : 2, by expressing the conviction that everything is wholly empty and unsatisfying, for, 1 : 4, existence itself is mere monotonous repetition, and, 1 : 8, in this repetition there is nothing but weariness, 1 : 9, there is nothing new or fresh. Let one gain wisdom, its possession and exercise bring only pain and sorrow, 1 : 13. Wealth and pleasure bring only the same monotonous iteration of pain, 2 : 1. If one were to gain preëminence by wisdom the benefit derived from it would perish at death, 2 : 12. The exercise of self-denial in gaining wealth is uncompensated pain, 2 : 18, hence, 2 : 24, it is better not to vex oneself with fruitless desires, but rather to accept the good things that God gives, and to remember that God gives these things to whom he pleases; in short, both the accumulation of wealth and the enjoyment of it are wholly by God's ordering. The thought of the divine ordering of life suggests the thought of the proper human ordering of life; there is a proper time for every form of human activity, 3 : 1, yet, 3 : 9, what is the profit when these seasons and their results are fixed

by God and cannot be changed by man? God has set it in the hearts of men to search him out, yet they cannot do it, 3 : 11. The quiet acceptance of the good things which God gives is best, 3 : 12, for, 3 : 14, God conducts the affairs of this world, and man may not change them. If one should be provoked to say, 3 : 16, that the iniquity in the places of dispensing justice indicates that God has no control of matters, Qoheleth says, 3 : 17, there is a time and place for him to judge all. God may delay his judgment, and the inability of man to discern his reasons causes him to seem no superior to the beasts, 3 : 18, hence, 3 : 22, it is better to accept the ordering of God, to enjoy his gifts, for the immediate future has little ground of hope, the remote future is unknown.

These thoughts stir within Qoheleth the mood of utter dissatisfaction with life. The thought of the oppressions of the rich and powerful is grievous, and it makes him feel yet more deeply the futility of human efforts, 4 : 1. Perhaps he had felt the blessed stirring of natural compassion and had tried to correct some of these evils. The injustice in the world around him would seem to prove that a man better never have been born, rather than to have come into a world so full of misery, so full of injustice and oppression, 4 : 2. Much of human effort is the result of rivalry only, and success brings only envy, 4 : 4. Better have little with no effort, than much with its attendant cares, 4 : 6. In spite of all these considerations, men seek after what they cannot use and cannot dispose of after death, 4 : 8. In this struggle after success, 4 : 9, how disadvantageous is it to strive alone! The solitary effort, how often it fails! Only think how foolish it is for even a king to rule without counsel! 4 : 13. Let that king be a youth, 4 : 15, who enters upon his reign in the midst of popular applause, yet how evanescent the enthusiasm! The thought of religion now comes as a possible comfort, but it needs to be genuine, and no makeshift, 5 : 1. If a man has done wrong, or omitted duty, let him be honest with God and himself, 5 : 3. Does one think that he may disregard God with impunity and justify himself in it by the remembrance of the perversion of justice by human rulers, let him remember that there is a judge

high above all human judges, and no act of injustice goes unnoticed by him, 5 : 8. The bad rulers suggest a ruler who is profitable to his people—one devoted to agriculture, for the really good things of this life are derived from the humble industry connected with the soil, 5 : 9. The fruit of such labor does not of itself give satisfaction to men, 5 : 10, and, 5 : 11, the man who makes them an end in themselves is sure to suffer as he learns their profitless nature ; yet, 5 : 18, it is a good thing for a man to receive and enjoy the gifts of God, and an evil when he cannot ; in fact, if he does not gain the satisfaction of this life it is better to have died at birth, 6 : 1. Contentment also is better than going through life with unsatisfied longings, 6 : 9.

At this point the author's mood deepens ; if the things of this life kindle longings which must go unsatisfied, what is the good of them ? Do we really live to any purpose after all ? He thinks of some things really desirable. A good name, successful living are of supreme value, 7 : 1. This success may be secured by, 7 : 2, sorrow ; 7 : 8, patience ; 7 : 11, wisdom ; and, 7 : 14, moderation in prosperity, for all these experiences or qualities will help in oppression, adversity, and prosperity. All these things have been proved by wisdom in the meditations of Qoheleth, and he has set himself to ascertain what is preëminently wicked, 7 : 23, and this suggests to him, 7 : 25, a snare by which men are often caught, by the wiles of a wicked woman, and by rebound he thinks again, 8 : 1, of the value of wisdom and of the fear of God in the day of oppression. Although sinners take encouragement from God's delay to punish them, yet, 8 : 12, Qoheleth knows that it will go well with those who do God's will, and it will go ill with those who do not. Again he would guard against attempting the impracticable, 8 : 14 ; it is well not to vex one's soul with striving after the impossible, rather one should enjoy the good things which God grants, and let alone the things which cannot be done. As God's ordering now is, the good and the skillful and the wise fare no better than those of opposite character, 9 : 1 ; indeed, the worse men fare the better. Qoheleth exhorts to enjoy life and the good things which God has given without anxiety about consequences, 9 : 7.

At this point, after half moodily, yet on the whole dispassionately, describing life as it appears to him, the writer really rises to the conception of duty. Do your duty, he says, 9:10, because it is all that you can do for this life, and for those whom you love, and in this, 9:13, remember always to use wisdom; you will receive no thanks for duty faithfully done, you will be lightly esteemed, when the need for your wisdom shall have passed you will be forgotten, suffer neglect; while if at any time you show a little folly, you will lose what esteem has been accorded to you, therefore, 10:3, avoid the part of a fool with his useless talk and aimless toil; if under a king, be discreet even though subjected to provocations to folly or anger, 10:4. Be not surprised in life to see the proper relations of men reversed, 10:6; if you would undertake great things, remember that there is danger, for the ventures of the adventurous are sure to pass the gateway of peril, 10:8.

Here is a decided break in the thought; after a few miscellaneous observations respecting the condition of a country under various types of kings, and the proper conduct toward them he urges the importance of rising superior to the untoward conditions of life, 10:16. Act boldly, 11:1, like the corn merchant, but do not trust all at one venture, and remember that the result of a venture is unchangeable: activity and caution are positively commended.

After all, when all shall have been said and done most wisely, and the sweet light has been enjoyed to the utmost, there are days coming which shall end it, 11:7. Youth may well enjoy the bounding pulses, the keen delight in mere existence, in all that sweetens the untasted cup of life; yet let him so live and enjoy that when the days of limitation and weakness come no sting shall remain, 11:9.

Qoheleth had pondered upon the mysteries of life and sought to state things so that they should stimulate man toward that which is better, 12:9; and his general conclusion is, 12:13, that the only thing which can leave a man satisfied is to fear God and keep his commandments.

In this tracing of thought we see Qoheleth beginning with

the conviction that, after all, the things in which he has made the happiness of his life to consist, are really husks, and that every attempt of the sort to gather satisfaction in life has the same result. We see one impulse rise after another, the vacillating moods and gradually developing purposes which finally develop into the writer's conclusion. From the profitless life which he has lived, now that he has arrived at the Father's house, he would warn the youth eager to taste the gratifications of this life to the full, by showing him what dregs there are in the cup. Thus the book indicates the sins, mistakes, and follies of the author, and it reveals his imperfect conception of the meaning of life, also those moral convictions which at last brought him to God. In this book are indications of the disordered state of society which was unfavorable to righteous conduct. This latest Old Testament utterance more than any other makes evident the need of a Redeemer.